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Regionalizing World Migration

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An insistence on the broad similarities and structural linkages of migrations across the globe since the 1840s is important because it can clear the ground for more effective comparisons. Only after questioning the *a priori* distinction that privileges "modern" transatlantic migrations as categorically distinct from those in the rest of the world can we begin to understand each migrant and migrant flow as emerging from a distinct nexus of global, regional, local, and historical processes.[1] I think I am in agreement with all of the participants in this forum on this basic point. Rather than quibble over numbers and definitions, all of the contributions have attempted to refine our historical comparisons and question some of the interpretive frameworks that are rooted in depictions of the Atlantic migrations as a norm. Once this global foundation is established, we can engage in the detailed empirical and conceptual work that will better address the sticky problems of numbers and categories. Who and what is actually being counted and not counted? When and why should we distinguish between long and short distance, or between international and domestic migration? How should we deal with return and repeat migrations? What is revealed or obscured by taking individuals, families or more extended networks as the basic units of migration? What is the practical or discursive significance of "free" migration?

An understanding of migration as a global process also does more than just expand the field of potential comparisons. The very act of insisting that migrations around the world follow a similar logic poses questions about the basic narratives and explanations of Western modernity that have allowed us to ignore migrations beyond the Atlantic in the first place. In particular, it leads us to question the ideal of the "free" migrant and better investigate the ways in which all migration – indeed our very knowledge of migration – has been shaped by a range of institutional,

* In addition to the authors in this forum, this response has benefited from comments by Nicholas Evans, Drew Keeling, and Jose Moya.

1. For similar arguments, see Sucheta Mazumdar, "Chinese and Indian Migration: A Prospectus for Comparative Research", in Wong Siu-lun (ed.), *Chinese and Indian Diasporas: Comparative Perspectives* (Hong Kong, 2004), pp. 139–167; and *idem*, "What Happened to the Women? Chinese and Indian Male Migration to the United States in Global Perspective", in Shirley Hune and Gail Nomura (eds), *Asian American and Pacific Islander Women: A Historical Anthology* (New York, 2003), pp. 58–74.

regulatory, and coercive practices. Bosma, Feldman, and Moch have all shown how global comparative perspectives can help us re-evaluate the institutions and organization of European emigration. Moch points out that the strong role of family in shaping Chinese migration is not a divergence from the norms of "free" Atlantic migration. Families are a primary institution that has shaped all migration, including the transatlantic. Bosma adds that rather than emphasize only the "freedom" of European migration we should also pay attention to forms of coercion and state management that have sent Europeans around the world. In a similar vein, Feldman discusses how laws and state planning have shaped even domestic migrations within Britain.

Bosma, Feldman, and Moch implicitly critique the idea of a normative "free" migration that exists prior to institutions. Mazumdar and Mohapatra more explicitly criticize the very use of a dichotomy of "free" and "unfree" migration. Mazumdar draws attention to the wide range of methods used to coerce and organize migration, and to the importance of racialization in drawing concrete historical boundaries between Asian and Atlantic migrations.[2] Mohapatra insists that some form of control has permeated all levels of the migration process even if not directly exerted by governments or powerful employers. He even suggests that the recent scholarly emphasis on migrant networks can further reify migration as a process that exists independently from regulatory institutions, thus further obscuring the mutually constitutive relationship between regulation and mobility. Their points are well taken. My (sloppy) use of the word "free" was intended to highlight broad similarities in migrant organization around the globe, but ultimately reproduced those same dichotomies that have played such an important role in marking non-Atlantic migrations as characteristically unfree and outside of modern world history in the first place.[3]

Mohapatra and Mazumdar also insist that a global perspective needs to better recognize the asymmetrical effects of European hegemony over the scope and organization of non-Atlantic migrations. This challenge is echoed in Bosma's emphasis on empire as one of the most important contexts for understanding global migration in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the great bulk of Indian migration, indentured or not, ended up within the British Empire. The most significant migrant flow from the Atlantic to Pacific systems, that of Europeans to Australia and New

2. Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius 1834–1874* (New Delhi, 1995) shows that calculative family networks existed in conjunction with Indian indenture rather than as an opposed form of migration.

3. The issue of "free" migration and regulation are explored in my book, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Invention of Border Control, 1850–1930* (New York, forthcoming). See also Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999).

Zealand, was made possible by empire. And migration into north Asia was inseparable from the expansion and consolidation of the Qing, Russian, and Japanese empires, which in turn made the north Asian system the most insular of the three global systems.

My own global view is admittedly built on a somewhat Sinocentric perspective. Perhaps more than any migrant group, it is difficult to understand Chinese migration in terms of empire. Chinese migrants crossed the borders of more empires and independent states than any other migrant group in the world. Their mobility was built on the precedents of institutions and practices that had channeled Chinese mobility both within and without China for centuries. These institutions and migratory patterns were transformed in the context of European economic expansion, but the experiences of the average migrant were still distant from the large coastal merchant with access to European markets and finances. In other words, Chinese migration is best understood as part of an expanding global economy, and empire was only one aspect of that economy.

But empire was surely a very important aspect of that global economy, and a global perspective on migration needs to bring empire back in. In particular, Bosma's argument that empires increasingly directed migrations in the late nineteenth century fits well with the fact that migration was increasingly segregated into distinct regional systems over the second half of the nineteenth century. And, as Mohapatra and Mazumdar insist, these regional systems did not necessarily share the same economic conditions and processes of circulation. But in recognizing these differences, we must take care to tread carefully across the tangled landscape of differences grounded in local circumstances, those that emerged as part of the process of globalization and empire building, and those that exist largely in the realm of representation. These latter, in particular, have been very important in depicting the non-Atlantic as places outside modern history and thus obscuring the inequalities that are part and parcel of globalization.

A global perspective can help understand not only similarities, but also the broad context in which difference is generated. In the middle of the nineteenth century, global migration patterns had pointed towards the creation of a single global system. The segmentation of global migration into three main systems – the Atlantic, south-eastern Asia, and north-eastern Asia – grew more pronounced over the course of the nineteenth century. Globalization generated difference even as it brought the world together. As empires increasingly shaped the direction of migration, so did barriers and exclusions from places both outside and within empires. And, to echo Mazumdar, both barriers and empires were built on a groundwork of racialization.

This increased segmentation can be seen in the long-term distribution of migration from south China and India (Figures 1 and 2). At least 227,000 migrants from south China traveled to the Americas and Australia in the

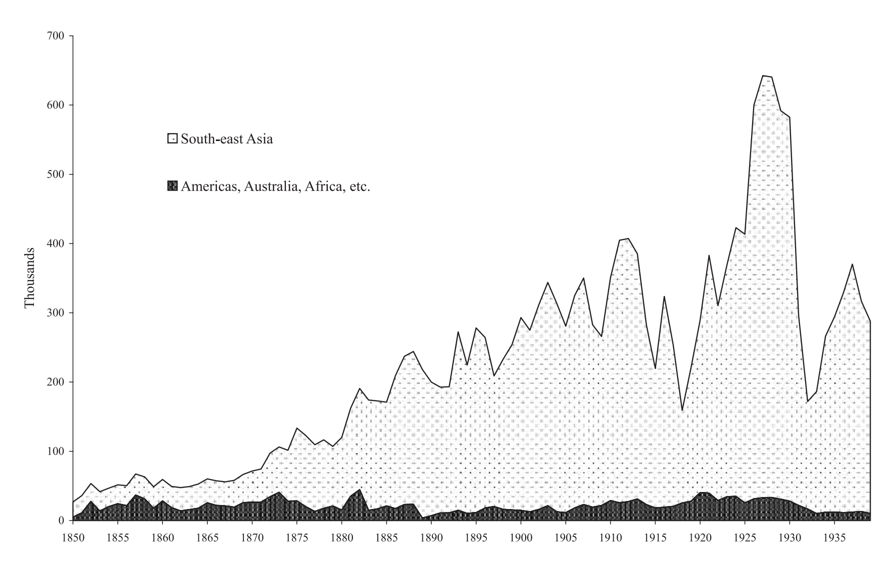


Figure 1: Chinese migration, 1850–1940.
Sources: See Adam McKeown, "Global Migrations, 1846–1940", *Journal of World History* 15 (2004), pp. 188–189.

1850s. The number of migrants to south-east Asia in this period is an estimate, but migration to non-Asian destinations likely amounted to at least 40 per cent of all emigration from south China. Indentured migrants, mostly to Cuba and Peru, accounted for about 90,000 of these migrants. The remaining 135,000 went mostly to the goldfields of California and Australia, with nearly 50,000 Chinese travelling to California in the period from 1851 to 1855 alone. These gold-rush migrants were funded and organized by Chinese capital and depended on Chinese mining skills. But, as Chinese migration expanded in later years, this movement beyond Asia remained stagnant. It declined to 6 per cent of total emigration in the late 1880s and remained at that level over the next five decades. The subsequent stagnation was not a consequence of inadequate resources, earth-bound peasant mentalities, or any other distinction that made Chinese migrants categorically different from European emigrants. It was a result of exclusionary laws in North America and Australia and the scarcity of inexpensive direct transportation to Latin America after the end of indenture.

Shifts in the proportions of Indian migration beyond Asia are not so dramatic, but their exclusion from non-Asian destinations was much more complete. About one-quarter of all Indian overseas migration in the 1840s and 1850s was to non-Asian destinations, most of it in conditions of indenture. The number of migrants beyond Asia retained a steady average

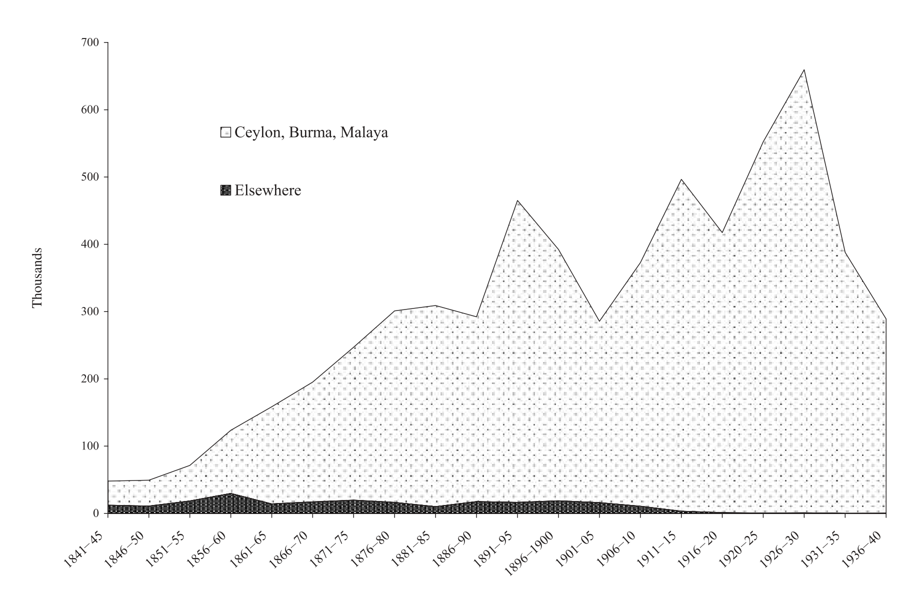


Figure 2. Indian emigration, 1841–1940 (5-year averages).
Sources: See McKeown, "Global Migrations", p. 187.

of about 16,000 migrants a year from the 1840s until the decline of indenture after the turn of the century. But by the 1880s the proportion of migration beyond Asia had already declined to about 5 per cent of total migration. And unlike the Chinese, Indian migration beyond Asia did not remain steady after the end of indenture, but declined to an insignificant trickle by the 1910s. Most indentured Indians had traveled to islands with few economic opportunities outside the plantations, reducing the attraction for new migrants and making it difficult to build durable migration networks. The few that traveled to North America after the turn of the century were unable to establish strong circulatory networks before the imposition of exclusionary measures, which were implemented with great efficiency by local governments that had learned from their experiences in regulating Chinese and Japanese immigrants. South Africa and colonies in eastern Africa were the only non-Asian destinations with established Indian communities and economic opportunities to attract new migrants in the early twentieth century. But by the 1900s, South Africa was also cordoned off behind exclusionary legislation.

This global segmentation also produced differences in the internal dynamics of the three systems. The differences can be seen most clearly in long-term patterns of return migration, female migration, and the shifting origins of migration. In Europe, the main migrant homelands shifted broadly from north-western to south-eastern Europe between 1840 and

1940. No similar shift can be found in Asia. In south China, despite local shifts between counties and villages, the main migrant-sending regions of the 1850s were still the main migrant-sending regions of the 1930s. The proportion of migrants departing from different ports remained almost constant from the 1870s to the early 1920s, after which Hong Kong started to increase slightly.[4]

Proportions of return and female migration also changed more dynamically across the Atlantic, rising and falling along with the changing family structures in migrant homelands and the changing nature of work in the receiving countries. Figure 3 compares return migration from the United States and south-east Asia, regions which respectively received 39 and 35 million migrant arrivals from 1870 to 1930. Return migration from south-east Asia remained a fairly steady 63 to 75 per cent of all arrivals from 1870 to 1930, with Chinese averaging 64 per cent and Indian migration averaging 78 per cent.[5] Return migration from the United States, on the other hand, declined from 32 per cent in the depression years of the late 1870s to 13 per cent in the early 1880s, then gradually grew to over 50 per cent in the 1910s.[6] Figure 4 shows that annual return rates (driven more by changes in emigration than return migration) from the US to Europe were quantitively more volatile than those of overseas Chinese to China, even as the temporal similarity of return cycles suggests participation in the business cycles of a common global economy.

In a less dramatic fashion, proportions of women also fluctuated more in migrations to the United States than to south-east Asia. The proportion of women migrating to the US was as low as 20 per cent in the early nineteenth century. It rose to 40 per cent in 1860s, where it remained until a sudden drop to 30 per cent in 1900. The proportion of women remained at this level until 1914, after which it gradually increased to 54 per cent by the late 1930s. In contrast, the proportion of women leaving Hong Kong grew steadily from 6 per cent in the 1860s to 18 per cent in the late 1920s, then doubling to 36 per cent by the late 1930s.[7] Unlike Europe, migration from south China became a multigenerational strategy that endured and expanded in the same region for over a century. Only with the global depression of the 1930s did the proportions of return and female migration from Asia start to correspond with European migration.

4. Quantitative data on Chinese emigration are compiled from data collected by Elizabeth Sinn for her Hong Kong Research Grants Council funded project, "The Impact of Chinese Emigration on Hong Kong's Economic Development, 1842–1941", and from trade reports of the China Maritime Customs.

5. See n. 3, and Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (New York, 1951), pp. 99–100.

6. Susan B. Carter *et al.* (eds), *Historical Statistics of the United States*, I (Cambridge [etc.], 2006), pp. 547–548.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 586–587; Sinn, "Impact of Chinese Emigration".



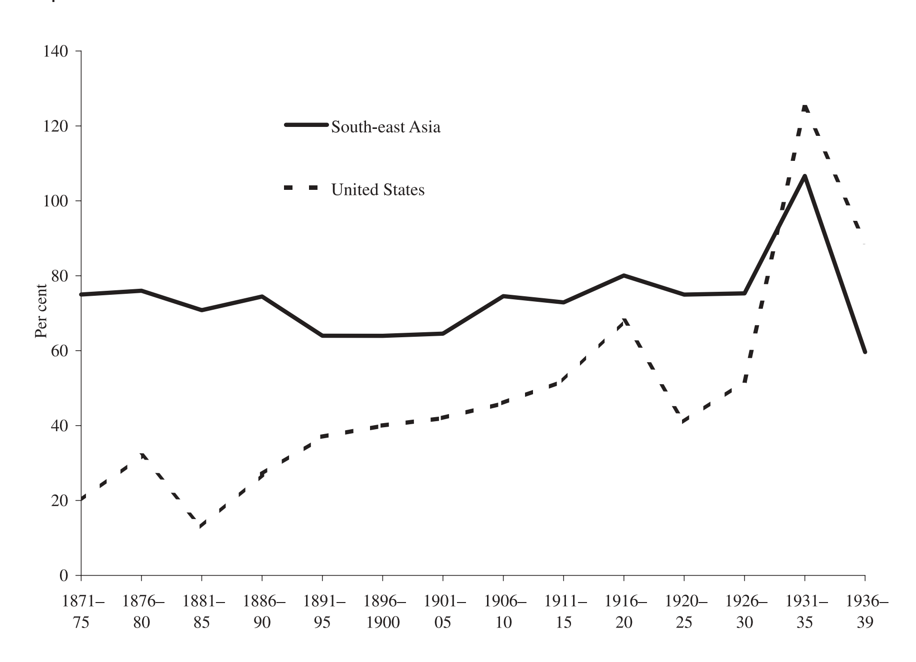


Figure 3. Return migration as proportion of arrivals, 1871–1939.
Sources: Carter *et al.* (eds) *Historical Statistics*, 1, pp. 547–548; McKeown, "Global Migrations", pp. 186–189.

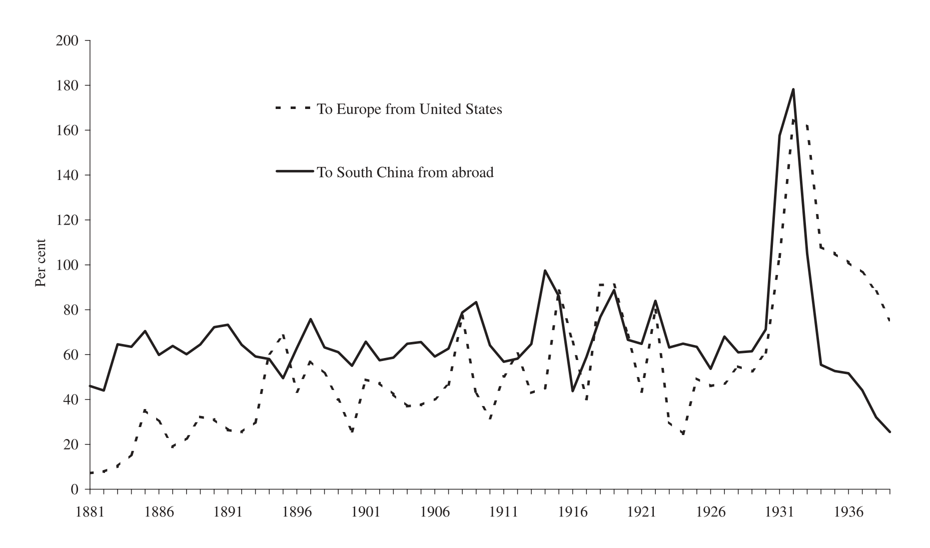


Figure 4. Proportion of return migration, US and south China, 1881–1939.
Sources: See notes 3 and 5.

The relative stability of long-term migration patterns to south-east Asia suggests a less dynamic economic context. More research will be necessary to determine the causes and extent of these differences. At the very least it seems shaped by a lack of wage convergence such as that which took place between north-west Europe and the Americas. It also suggests relatively static rural conditions in China and India, and a relatively stable occupational structure in south-east Asia. Shifting sites of emigration in Europe corresponded with the spread of industrialization and urbanization across the continent. The Asian countryside was also highly commercialized – an important condition for emigration – but not experiencing the same intensity of industrial transformation. The rise in female and return migration to Europe may be partly explained by greater emigration from regions with larger stem families, as argued by Donna Gabaccia.[8] Along with the relatively shorter distances, this may account for the high return rates in Asia. But it still draws attention to the dynamic shift in emigration sources from Europe.

On the receiving end, shifting proportions of female and return migration from the Americas corresponded with changing conditions of frontier settlement, urbanization, and shifting industrial occupations that increasingly preferred male workers. South-east Asia, in contrast, experienced minimal urbanization in this period.[9] The new colonial trade entrepôts like Singapore and Rangoon were built and populated largely by Asian migrants, but holding a fairly static collection of artisanal, mercantile, and transportation-related jobs. The bulk of migrants worked as rural proletariats, both independently and on large plantations. None of these were occupations that employed high numbers of women. Only with the rise of small Chinese family retailers after the turn of the century did the proportion of Chinese women grow.[10]

Economic globalization generated migration around the world, but empires and migration control increasingly divided that migration into regions that experienced distinct long-term dynamics. These differences were not the consequence of some parts of the world being outside globalization. Mass migration took place in all parts of the globe and with broadly similar forms of organization under conditions of economic globalization. But that globalization affected different parts of the world unequally. The privileging of the Atlantic migrations as the norm of "modern" migrations has helped to depict the rest of the world as outside

8. Donna Gabaccia, "Women of the Mass Migrations", in Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch (eds), *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston, MA, 1996), pp. 115–140.
9. Anthony Reid, "South-East Asian Population History and the Colonial Impact", in Ts'ui-jung Liu (ed.), *Asian Population History* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 55–59.
10. Adam McKeown, "From Opium Farmer to Astronaut: A Global History of Diasporic Chinese Business", *Diaspora*, 9 (2000), pp. 317–360.

the central trends of freedom, modernity, and globalization. An emphasis on global linkages helps us perceive how those inequalities and segmentation have been part and parcel of economic globalization. At the same time we must also recognize the practical power of tools such as racialization and exclusionary barriers to make that segmentation into a reality.